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Major Professor

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The ChesterShaw: The Views and Ideas That Shaped the Friendly Rivalry of G.K.
Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw

by

Jonathan L. Vowell

A Thesis

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Abstract

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G.K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw both lived at the turn of the twentieth century, which was a time of incredible social and philosophic change and upheaval. In reaction to the social chaos and uncertainty, both men sought to change the world through their artistic and polemical works and thus were friends, yet both men wanted to change the world into different things for different reasons and thus were enemies. Their intellectual, friendly rivalry was a hallmark of early twentieth-century public discourse and English letters. Unfortunately, while their artistic contributions remain, most of their intellectual contributions have been either misunderstood (in regard to Shaw) or forgotten (in regard to Chesterton). Therefore, to once again appreciate the rich and profound intellectual lives of these two men, we must investigate their thoughts and positions on what they saw as the most important issues of life: God, humanity, and society.

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Introduction

“...he today that sheds his blood with me / shall be my brother.” –Shakespeare

People often like to say (in civilized circles) that the twentieth century was the worst century that history has to offer precisely because of the senseless madness of its various atrocities. In fact, “mad” would be a good summation of that time. The current twenty-first century frenzy over human rights violations and state sponsored genocides can easily be seen as a violent reaction to over a hundred years of insanity and inhumanity, both of which are easy enough to prove. The splitting of the atom in science, the construction of the concentration camp in politics, the nightmarish visions and ecstasies of the surrealists in art, and the overall moral breakdown in society (trusting neither the state, the church, nor themselves) are all hallmarks of a century whose most chief characteristic seems to be the killing field from Gallipoli to Vietnam. At least, that would be the argument of the people in civilized circles.

The only real problem with such an impressive argument is that it is simply not true on at least two points. The first is that unless we are ardent pessimists, the above-mentioned description of the twentieth century is (at best) a caricature.¹ The second is that while the twentieth century *may* have been the worst in that it was the bloodiest, it was not truly “mad.” The nefarious title of utter lunacy belongs to the prior century: the nineteenth century. It is in that century (especially the latter fifty years) that all the true manias begin to fester and grow, with many able-body madmen tilling the soil. A rebel set arose in complete reaction to Victorianism and the Enlightenment, and although they were a minority, they were a boisterous minority that took the century by storm. Perhaps it is a matter of poetical irony that Oscar Wilde died in the year 1900, serving almost as

¹ Although, like all caricatures, it is based on or around some truth.

the perfect capstone for a century that he truly came to epitomize. Wilde was not a new sensation when he died in shame; the green carnation withered from old age and not from any mower's blade.

That the nineteenth century was the century of madness is equally easy to demonstrate. One merely has to look at the small yet potent collection of twentieth century madmen and ask who their masters were, and without fail one will have to turn their attention to the small yet potent collection of mad writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century. Where would the bloody revolutions of Russia and China be without Karl Marx's searing critique of industrialized capitalism? Where would the depressing darkness of realism be without the evolutionary principles of Charles Darwin, and where would the liberal party be without evolution's theory of inevitable progress? Furthermore (and perhaps most importantly), does not every lunatic of the twentieth century (from the fascist to the surrealist) bow at the altar of Nietzsche? Is there a single major philosophic, artistic, or political figure of the past one hundred years that has not paid their respects to the philosophic shrine of that infamous German professor who died in insanity? Indeed, the god of the twentieth century was apparently Zarathustra, and Nietzsche was his prophet.

It should be easy enough to see that whatever the twentieth century was, it was most certainly an effect and not a cause. The past one hundred years were nothing but sheer reaction to its predecessor, and it is not unfair to say that we all have been reeling ever since. The twentieth century was just a hangover; the nineteenth was the drunken orgy. It was there that all the priceless pillars of society were viciously assaulted and were felled (due in no small part to the combination of inability and compromise on the

part of their so-called defenders). Capitalism was a monstrosity, and God equally so. Their only purpose now was to serve as obstacles blocking mankind from its true potential as a species. As such, they needed to be torn down, by violence if it was necessary. So anarchists would lob bombs in Ireland, and radicals would assassinate royal families in Russia. Supermen of various shapes and sizes would rise to blacken the world with the soot of mechanized warfare and the searing light of the atomic bomb. Obsessed with a Darwinian “survival of the fittest,” radicals on the left and right declared that the sole good of every man, woman, and child was *negation*, i.e., to tear down every existing form of religion, monarchy, and industry that had served as the unquestionable prop for Victorian mysteries and manners. One could say that negation was yet another god of the twentieth century, with every rebel a priest baptizing the world in blood. In reaction, other radicals formed cults of monarchy and authoritarianism, such as in Germany and Japan. All of these things, however, were just the effects of a previous cause. If the children’s teeth were on edge, then it is because the fathers ate sour grapes.

Such an assessment of the nineteenth century (like the twentieth century) is a fair generalization. Of course, like most generalizations, it leaves some major details out of consideration. Amidst the tumult of madmen, there were plenty of theologians, politicians, writers, thinkers, and artists who struggled against what must have seemed to be a dismal tide, from Gregor Mendel’s genetic rebuttal to Darwinism to T.S. Eliot’s call for a return to tradition. Even Nietzsche, the man that almost every twentieth century radical would have pledge unyielding allegiance to, was attempting (in perhaps the greatest of all ironies) to provide the Western world with a stable foundation to combat what he saw as the oncoming horrors of nihilism. Their efforts have not been forgotten

and are even now discussed and highly respected, though it is still fair to say that the nineteenth century ultimately gave into its darker impulses, and its children were swept out to sea.

Amongst the pantheon of reactionary voices, two stand out above the rest: G.K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw. Both lived in the midst of the chaotic latter years of the nineteenth century, and both fought the rising insanity in their own way (usually by fighting each other). They highly valued being gadflies, stirring up various hornets' nests on both the right and the left. Through works of art and political polemics, they stood with various others who sought to stem the tide of nihilistic despair as best as they could. As such, they etched their names in twentieth century history and are still highly regarded as men of letters, though perhaps for the wrong reasons.

In truth, Chesterton and Shaw have been woefully misunderstood and (at least for Chesterton) undervalued. Such an unfortunate result is a matter of both tragedy and irony. For Chesterton, it is a matter of tragedy: many of his works have been needlessly ignored (if not forgotten) in the vast majority of the academic and public arenas. Though his *Father Brown* stories remain popular, the fact that he was a rigorous, deep thinker and twentieth century intellectual is vastly unknown amongst the populace. It is no exaggeration to say that Chesterton is *the* best-kept secret of the twentieth century. His writing was prolific and crossed several genres, including book reviews, autobiography, biographies, plays, fiction, and poetry as well as books of theology, philosophy, apologetics, politics, and society. In addition, he wrote thousands of essays (most of which for the *Illustrated London News*) on any and every subject imaginable. He has remained a vital influence for writers and artists in various ways, such as C.S. Lewis's

conversion, J.R.R. Tolkien's book, Ingmar Bergman's films, and Neil Gaiman's comics; and yet he is barely mentioned in any classroom, and hardly any class syllabi contain even one of his works, plenty of which are considered masterpieces of English letters. Of course, no one can say (or ever has said) that he is ignored because his writing and ideas were no good. Even Shaw, perhaps his most constant (and sometimes vicious) opponent, called him a "colossal genius" whose writings and thought should be taken seriously (Furlong 67). They are not taken seriously, however, and that is Chesterton's tragedy. To the majority of the public, he is merely an author of detective fiction and nothing more. Shaw's advice has apparently been ignored.

That Shaw can be (and has been) ignored is a matter of irony, mainly because anyone reading that last sentence will find it incredible. Who has not heard of Shaw? How many successful careers have been launched and maintained studying Shaw? How many universities have entire classes devoted to him? What class syllabus (when it covers the twentieth century) does not mention him at least once? What theater company (if it wants any real credibility) does not perform a Shavian comedy? One could quite easily argue that Shaw has had the opposite problem of Chesterton: practically no one talks about Chesterton, and practically no one will shut up about Shaw. What must be noted, however, is that while Shaw and his plays are studied and discussed vigorously, no one really takes his philosophic ideas seriously any more. Indeed, no one took his philosophic ideas seriously when he was alive. As will be demonstrated in the coming pages, Shaw was the most troublesome kind of rebel because he belonged to no one except himself. Even the socialists and other liberal radicals of his time found themselves equal parts enamored and frustrated with a Shavian speech or idea. He knew no party line

if he had not written it, and he flew no flag unless he had stitched it together himself. Even the exceptions to this pattern prove the rule, since Shaw's undying enthusiasm for the Russian communist "experiments" made him look even more zany to other liberals. The end result of his rather customized belief system is that while his plays remain in both the public and academic spotlight his philosophic thought has been ultimately (and ironically) ignored as something quaint and trivial, just another odd product from that odd era in human history.

It must not be thought that because Chesterton and Shaw have been ultimately ignored now that they were ignored in their own lifetimes. As will be shown, there was no bigger show than Chesterton and Shaw. Their public encounters (always in the form of debates) filled many an auditorium to bursting. Shaw's numerous plays made him an instant celebrity, and Chesterton won many fans with his detective fiction and newspaper articles. In addition (and perhaps most importantly), the fact that they had similar goals and yet divergent opinions meant that whenever they did put on a debate (or address each other in letters and speeches), it was always an intense and fiery spectacle.

However, as spectacular as they were, their thoughts on vital issues (such as God, humanity, and society) have seemingly died with them, leaving Chesterton to be mostly forgotten and Shaw misunderstood. This should have never happened. Both men lived through perhaps the most perilous and unstable period of human history: the turn of the twentieth century. Both men had plenty to say about everything going on around them, and what they fundamentally believed filled every inch of what they had to say and write. They were easily the most important critics and commentators to ever be produced in the

past two hundred years of English literature, and as such their works should (for Chesterton) be studied and (for Shaw) studied much more carefully.

What follows, then, is a primer (so to speak) on the ideas and views that these two men held. This is not so much a biography as it is an investigation of their minds: what they believed, why they believed it, how their ideas differed from each other, and why we should take their ideas and writings more seriously. To demonstrate this, we shall be looking at their views on God (or first/ultimate principles), humanity, society, and art. During such a process, you may notice sharp similarities emerge between the two; but you will notice even further and more clearly the sharp differences. Both men despised the insanity of the modern world. Both men advocated change. The only difference between them was *how* to change and *what* was to be the result of that change, a difference that fueled their rivalry all the way to Chesterton's death in 1936.

There can be no discussing the nature of the minds of two great men (or anybody for that matter) without a sense of necessary repetition occurring throughout the following pages. The four areas mentioned above (God, humanity, society, and the arts) always overlap in any serious discussion. You cannot discuss humanity without discussing society nor discuss society without discussing art, and you surely cannot discuss any of them without discussing either God or His absence. Thus, arguments and concepts fleshed out in one section will crop up in another. Of course, categorization has been made for convenience's sake, but such divisions are fundamentally arbitrary. The thoughts and ideas of Chesterton and Shaw cannot be contained by any outline, no matter how thorough. For them, the task at hand was no small matter of either rebellion or reaction. At stake was nothing less than the future of the human race itself, in regard to

both its survival and happiness. Thus, their systems of thought are as large as the universe and just as interconnected, and we would be wise to give them a fair as well as proper hearing.

Chapter 1: A Little Bit of History

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born on May 29, 1874 to Edward and Marie Chesterton (Chesterton, *Autobiography* 21). Edward was in charge (along with his brother Sydney) of the family estate-agent business, though his true passion lay in the arts (Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence* 3). He would spend “the rest of his life, between occasional visits to the office, pursuing a wide variety of intellectual and artistic pursuits” (Oddie 15). Most of Chesterton’s love of (and knack for) literature stems from his father’s influence (Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence* 4), as well as his wit and sense of humor. Chesterton remarked that his father was “serene, humourous and full of hobbies” and that he “had all the Pickwickian evenness of temper and pleasure in the humours of travel. He was rather quiet than otherwise, but his quietude covered a great fertility of notions; and he certainly liked taking the rise out of people” (Chesterton, *Autobiography* 47). It was from his father that he would acquire his self-proclaimed key element of his childhood, an element that would last into his adulthood and inform his philosophy: the toy theatre, where his father often performed puppet shows about knights and dragons and princesses. We shall return to that element shortly.

Chesterton says very little of his mother, whose family came from “the French-speaking region of Switzerland” and had a “Wesleyan” Protestant background (Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence* 8). There is no reason to read anything sinister into this omission, as Chesterton himself asserts when (most likely making fun of Romantics or Freudians) he sarcastically “apologizes” that his autobiography has

no gloomy and savage father to offer to the public gaze as the true cause of all my tragic heritage; no pale-faced and partially poisoned mother whose suicidal instincts have cursed me with the temptations of the artistic temperament.... I cannot do my duty as a true modern, by cursing everybody who made me

whatever I am. I am not clear about what it is; but I am pretty sure that most of it is my own fault. (*Autobiography* 38)

It is unclear what Chesterton's exact feelings were towards his mother, though we can fairly guess that they were positive rather than negative. Nevertheless, neither she nor her family—especially their Protestantism and teetotalism (Chesterton, *Autobiography* 29)—seemed to carry much influence on Chesterton's life, other than her perhaps somewhat lax parenting contributing to his slipshod and absent-minded behavior as an adult (Oddie 17).

The earlier-mentioned toy theatre was the first (and most lasting) primary influence in Chesterton's life. Aside from being his first true memory as a child (Chesterton, *Autobiography* 40), it would become, at a "crucial time" in his life, a "fixed symbol" for the entirety of his life's philosophy (Wills 20). Exactly what that philosophy was will be elucidated later. What needs to be stressed now are the three things that the toy theatre gave to Chesterton, three things that would serve to shape his thoughts ever since. The first was the sense of surprise as fundamental to joy. His father, who built the toy theatre, had an "amiability" about him that "created for children the permanent anticipation of what is profoundly called Surprise" (Chesterton, *Autobiography* 48), and the toy theatre served as the greatest symbol of the joyous effects that surprise can engender. How it served as this symbol leads us to the second thing that the toy theatre gave Chesterton: the sense of wonder as fundamental to joy. For Chesterton, what was "wonderful about childhood is that anything was a wonder. It was not merely a world full of miracles; it was a miraculous world" (*Autobiography* 46). The "wonder" of the toy theatre is found first in that Chesterton's father "could transform the home of a house agent" into a whole other world (Oddie 20-1). This transformation was a surprise, for

although the average Victorian was obsessed with all things medieval or “Gothic,” no one would expect to find a literal world of knights and dragons in an ordinary English house. Such a surprise produced wonder, which, in turn, produced joy. Such things were perhaps common in late-Victorian sensibilities, but they remained a central part of Chesterton’s philosophy.

Two things must be quickly stressed. The first is that this logical connection between surprise, wonder, and joy may seem silly (for a toy theatre is a silly thing), but for Chesterton it was incredibly serious and profound. As William Oddie explains, “[The idea of surprise and subsequent wonder] was at the root of his religious apologetic; and it was the driving force of his almost unconscious tendency towards the unearthing of paradox in apparently unfruitful soil” (19). For Chesterton, the “expectation that the everyday is the gateway to the unforeseen, that normality is a kind of veil hiding the possibility of surprise, even of wonder,” is the underlying theme of his entire philosophic outlook (Oddie 19).

The second thing to be stressed is the connection that is made between surprise/wonder and joy. For Chesterton, a philosophy that does not lead to joy is no philosophy at all but anti-philosophy. This is because, for him, joy is the root of all things human:

The mass of men have been forced to be gay about the little things, but sad about the big ones. Nevertheless (I offer my last dogma defiantly) it is not native to man to be so. Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive state of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labour by which all things live. (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 166)

A lack of joy is inhuman, and any philosophy that does not end in it is equally inhuman.²

The third thing that the toy theatre gave to Chesterton was his love of “frames and limits” (Oddie 21). As Chesterton put it,

I am no psychologist, thank God; but if psychologists are still saying what ordinary sane people have always said—that early impressions count considerably in life—I recognize a sort of symbol of all that I happen to like in imagery and ideas. All my life I have loved edges; and the boundary-line that brings one thing sharply against another. All my life I have loved frames and limits; and I will maintain that the largest wilderness looks larger seen through a window.
(*Autobiography* 41)

This love of limitations served two purposes. The first would be Chesterton’s assertion of strong ideals and dogmas in the face of a culture ready to wipe away all sense of distinction in the smog of relativism (i.e., everything is equal) or the gamble of evolution (i.e., everything changes).³ Chesterton believed in lines: thick, sharp lines that delineated clear distinctions. Anything less was a mere muddle that stood in the way of truth (and subsequently, joy). The second purpose was its introduction of mystery. This may seem to be a contradiction of the first purpose, but it is not. A part of making distinctions is to distinguish between what we can and cannot know; hence comes the element of mystery. Oddie explains,

² Chesterton’s philosophic focus on joy may sound similar to Nietzsche (viz., *The Gay Science*), but there is a serious difference. Chesterton’s philosophic emphasis was not on the joy of *philosophy*, but (as we shall see later) the joy of *existence itself*. For him, philosophy was not to create joy *for its own sake* but rather for the sake of the conclusions that it reaches (about God, humanity, etc.), particularly if they were equal parts practical and joyous. As such, he viewed any philosophy that praises philosophizing *itself* as another anti-philosophy.

³ Some may argue that relativism and evolution carry their own sense of “distinction,” but it is not the sense that Chesterton is advocating. For him, the only proper kinds of distinctions are ones that are *permanent, timeless, and/or eternal*. Relativistic and evolutionary distinctions are necessarily *transitory* and/or *ephemeral*: though distinction *per se* is constant, the distinctions themselves change either generationally (as with evolution) or circumstantially (as with relativism). For Chesterton, such a sense of distinctions is not acceptable: the only true and proper distinctions are the permanent/eternal ones because they create an intrinsic stability that is necessary for any kind of action. Action—whether we’re talking about physical action (e.g., building a society) or abstract action (e.g., reasoning correctly)—requires some sort of stable scheme in order to work. If the scheme changes constantly from one scheme to the next (either from generation to generation or from room to room), then there can be no action.

[Limitations] made possible the imaginative transcendence of the area thus confined. The point about the frame or the archway was that what could be seen led on to what could be imagined beyond its confines: tangible and definable reality, that is, was the gateway to the intangible and the undefinable. (22)

Oddie is right to call this view “quasi-sacramental” (22). For Chesterton, perceiving the world with sharp, distinguishing lines allowed for the intersection between the natural and the supernatural (and thus allowed for surprise and wonder) precisely because it made each more vivid. The instant the line is removed and the natural and supernatural become indistinguishable, they cease to exist. They fade away by becoming indiscernible. Thus, *all* of reality (including the knowable and unknowable) is contingent on the ability and willingness to draw the line somewhere.

Besides the toy theatre, the second primary influence on Chesterton’s life (and what can truly be called a watershed moment) was his time in the Slade School of Art. It was at this school that “the values of [Chesterton’s] upbringing” would collide with the “cultural movements of aestheticism and decadence” (Schwartz 34). It is here that Chesterton first confronted the madness of the nineteenth century. He was not at that time a Christian, but his revulsion at the philosophies of the Slade School (and his subsequent, lifelong anti-modern crusade) were fundamentally a reaction from his childhood notions of surprise, wonder, and proper limits (Oddie 7). Unfortunately, his homespun philosophy was no match for the nihilistic fervor of the Slade School’s so-called Decadent set. Wills explains,

[When] Chesterton went to art school in 1892, he went from one point of high concentration direct to its opposite pole, passing from Victorian content to *fin-de-siècle* gloom, each in its most exaggerated form. It was his devotion to the first set of ideals that caused his sad bewilderment among the aesthetes. His entire world was shattered, like a toy theater trampled into splinters. And the clash of these two shallow things drove Chesterton to depths. (21)

The exact “depths” that Chesterton fell into stemmed from a horrid brand of subjectivism known as solipsism, i.e., the individual mind is all that exists (since it is all that the individual can prove to exist). Such rank subjectivism was an obvious threat to Chesterton’s fundamental principles of surprise, wonder, and proper limits. When all becomes one large projection of the mind, there are no more limitations (since it is all produced by one mind) and subsequently no more surprises and wonders (since all of the projection is known to the individual mind). As Chesterton put it (while describing his time at Slade), it was the inability to “distinguish between dreaming and waking” since you had “projected the universe from within” (*Autobiography* 97). Chesterton felt the chilling effects of such fundamentally nihilistic thought processes, and although he never succumbed to them, they did leave him battered and shaken.

The result of this shakedown of his childhood beliefs was a monumental moment for Chesterton because it led him to Christianity. This must not be misunderstood as a type of escapism. Chesterton sought to combat the cynical pessimism of the Slade School by constructing a philosophy all his own. When he put the finishing touches on it, however, he found out that it was Christianity (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 16). In short, Chesterton “was an apostle of wonder at the joy of Being who found [his] metaphysical insight deepened by Roman Catholic theology” (Schwartz 31). His diagnosis of the modern world was “madness,” and his proposed cure was “humility” along with “the balance between the spiritual and the secular...plus [a] childlike gratitude for the bare facts of existence” (Schwartz 9). Exactly what was the shape of this “balance” will occupy proceeding sections. For now, let us turn to Shaw.

George Bernard Shaw was born on July 26th, 1856 in Dublin. His father, George Carr Shaw, was a failed corn merchant and a successful drunkard (Weintraub 27). Other than making him despise his “genteel” upbringing, Shaw’s father was hardly an influence on him. It was his mother, Lucinda, who would have the biggest effect on him. Feeling frustrated and lonely due to her husband’s alcoholism, Lucinda turned to music as a consolation (Weintraub 28). The presence of music in Shaw’s life would direct him towards the arts, and by the age of twenty, he abandoned his clerk job at a land agent’s office to seek fame in the London literary scene (Weintraub 28).

After some failed novels, Shaw found his stride in the 1880s when he “became the force behind the newly founded (1884) Fabian Society” (Weintraub 30). It was the Fabian hill that Shaw would fight on for the rest of his life (though as mentioned earlier, he was not exactly the same kind of socialist as the other Fabians). From then on he became known as the “intense rhetorician and [journalist]” he is now famous for being, showing himself to be “first of all...a vitalist and reformer” (Carpenter 6). Everything he wrote, from his art criticisms to (most importantly) his plays, was aimed at ethical reform, with his earlier writings attacking “the orthodoxies of the past” and his later writings giving “shape to the orthodoxies of the future” (Carpenter 7). Shaw’s mind would never cease working on this even to the day he died.

Shaw’s constant polemical presence has not exactly painted the friendliest depiction of him. He reveled in exaggeration and grand-standing, perhaps to the detriment of his ideas and hopes. As Weintraub put it, the Shaw that most people knew and still know was

a ruthless critic, devastating in wit, irreverent about people, careless about feelings, impudent towards conventions, iconoclastic towards institutions,

hyperbolic for effect, cold-blooded about politics, second-hand as a thinker—a Mephistopheles-Machiavelli...who boasted that he was better than Shakespeare. (33)

This large-than-life public persona often over-shadowed the private Shaw, a “warm, waggish, witty” man who was “sometimes sentimental, often self-less, [and] always sincere” (Weintraub 33). This inconsistency of character (perhaps Shaw’s only inconsistency) was due to his constant vision of social reform. Shaw saw himself as a servant to larger goals (and forces), and if his reputation had to suffer so those goals could be accomplished, then so be it. Eric Bentley (a close friend of Shaw’s) put it well:

His whole nature was histrionic. By this I mean, not that he is a charlatan, or insincere, but that acting is his means of communication, which is another way of saying that he communicates, not directly, but by impersonation. Such a relation to things and to other people is not peculiar to Shaw. It is the psychology of the born playwright and the born actor. (222)

If there were larger purposes at stake, then Shaw would wear whatever mask was necessary to accomplish those purposes. It was Chesterton himself who summed up this fact:

Here was a man who could have enjoyed art among the artists, who could have been the wittiest of the *flaneurs*: who could have made epigrams like diamonds and drunk music like wine. He was instead laboured in a mill of statistics and crammed his mind with all the most dreary and the most filthy details, so that he can argue on the spur of the moment about sewing-machines or sewage, about typhus fever or twopenny tubes. (*George Bernard Shaw* 402)

Shaw did not desire fame to make a fortune. Rather, his fame was the road to being heard; and in being heard, perhaps he could enact some good societal change.

Chesterton’s knowledge of Shaw was a result—besides his natural tendency to know the “mind” of a man (Furlong 49-50)—of their thirty-five-year friendship from 1901 to Chesterton’s death in 1936. Their first recorded encounter was at an art studio (of course) where Shaw was having a bust of his head made by the renowned sculptor

Auguste Rodin (4). Shaw was verbally showing off (as usual) for Rodin (whom he respected deeply) when Chesterton was introduced by a mutual acquaintance, Lucian Oldershaw (5). Though Shaw took no real notice of Chesterton then, he would take notice later when Chesterton would write *George Bernard Shaw* (a book which Shaw praised as well as critiqued) and when Chesterton would debate him on “The Future of Religion” at the Heretics Club in 1911 (73-4). That debate would be the first of many, concluding with “Do We Agree?” which was conducted in 1927 and published as a pamphlet in 1928 (175). They remained strong friends, though (coincidentally) they never agreed about anything. When it came to questions of God, man, society, and art, the two were like night and day. On that note, we may now turn to the most salient issues.

Chapter 2: First Principles (The Question of God)

Shaw was a vitalist. This is a point that must be stressed first and foremost. He was not a socialist. He was not an atheist. He was not (strictly speaking) even a progressive. He would have gladly sacrificed all such false gods on the altar of vitalism. It has been perhaps overlooked that Chesterton dubbed Shaw a “heathen mystic” (*George Bernard Shaw* 363), but he was incredibly close to the truth. Shaw spent most of his life reviewing “the gods of man from Jehovah to Science, and [he] closed with a blending of rationalism and mysticism” that has confounded his critics and supporters ever since (Weintraub 30). Exactly what this blending of rationalism and mysticism that so enamored Shaw (and frustrated others) is will be the subject of the next few pages.

Shaw lost faith in progress. This was not a hard thing to do at the turn of the twentieth century. All the great innovations of industrialism and the Enlightenment had withered into either the mechanized inhumanity of the factory and modern warfare or the corrosive sneer of decadent nihilism. Evolution’s so-called theory of inevitable progress revealed itself to be a lie. A theory of decay seemed far more reasonable. The nineteenth century oracles of hope had become the twentieth century harbingers of doom.

Shaw was no stranger to the theory of decay. He knew that the old ways of doing things had failed to deliver the goods in regard to utopic social justice. However, rather than abandon progress for nihilism (like the Decadents) or orthodoxy (like Chesterton), Shaw found new footing in a religious faith of his own making. Bentley explains,

Shaw...[came] to place less faith in the usual political machinery. And, as his faith in quick progress waned, his faith in slow progress increased. As he became less and less of an optimist over the short period, he became more and more of an optimist over the long period. This sort of optimism necessarily has its roots in a kind of faith that cuts deeper than legislation, political or economic, that cuts

deeper, in fact, than socialism. As Shaw's socialism grew less ingenuous, his secular religion became more important. (70)

It was this "secular religion" that "cut deeper" than even socialism that so frustrated Shaw's supporters. They would have much rather have him as a fiery atheist, whose constant outrageous blasphemies would tear down all religious order whatsoever (Furlong 77-8). Shaw did indeed utter constant outrageous blasphemies, but they were in the service of a new religious order that would replace all others, even atheism: "[Shaw did] his Shavian best to make it clear that he was not concerned with the destruction of religion but with the affirmation of a new religion," one that was purely Shavian (Furlong 91-2). Shaw's new religious order comes courtesy of what he calls the "crablike progress of social evolution" (*Ibsenism* 28) by which Western society moved from Faith to Reason and finally to Will. With Faith, mankind believed that objective truth existed outside of itself in a personal (or impersonal) lawgiver that contacted (or was contacted by) humanity at some point. Priests, altars, temples, and sacred tomes served as the keepers of the faith and the official liaison officers between mankind and the divine. With Reason, mankind began to discover its own ability to arrive at objective truth, and so it sought to abandon all the trappings of faith, shedding them with embarrassment as though they were the clothing of an infant. In the process, those who still held to Faith were horrified: "To the pious man the newly made freethinker, suddenly renouncing supernatural revelation, and denying all obligation to believe the Bible and obey the commands as such, appears to be claiming the right to rob and murder at large" (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 29). Of course, no such thing happens, as the rational "freethinker" constructs his own morality based solely on what is reasonable, a morality that seems "far more binding on our conscience than the precepts of a book [i.e., the Bible] of which the

infallibility cannot be rationally proved” (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 29). As such, the rationalist constructs a seemingly stable society on Reason.

Reason does not stand either, however. This is based on the simple principle that life is not absolutely reasonable, a principle that the rationalist is loathe to accept. He has enthroned Reason as “Dagon, Moloch, and Jehovah rolled into one” (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 29), and soon rationalism comes to mean no more than “syllogism worship” (30). It is at this point that Reason itself must be questioned, and when it is, it dies as hard as its forefathers:

[Just] as the rationalist’s pious predecessor thought that the man who scoffed at baptism and the Bible must infallibly yield without resistance to all his criminal propensities, so the rationalist in turn becomes convinced that when a man once loses his faith in vaccination and in Herbert Spencer’s Data of Ethics, he is no longer to be trusted to keep his hands off his neighbor’s person, purse, or wife. (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 30)

The rationalist cannot accept that life is unreasonable, that it (at bottom) cannot be reasonably justified. We do not live because it is reasonable to live, but because we *want* to live. That fact (for Shaw) brings us to the third stage in social evolution: the Will.

With Will, mankind once again locates truth within itself. However, it no longer sees it as an apprehension of objective truth by Reason, but rather an enforcement of subjective truth by the Will. This is where Shaw pays his respects to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Life is not lived by Reason; it is lived by the Will, which is “distinct from the reasoning machinery” in that it can lead a man to where “his will is to live even when his reason teaches him to die” (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 31). Shaw sees the ascension of the individual will as the next (and perhaps final) stage in social evolution:

First there was man’s duty to God, with the priest as assessor. That was repudiated; and then came Man’s duty to his neighbor, with Society as the

assessor. Will this too be repudiated, and be succeeded by Man's duty to himself, assessed by himself? (*Ibsenism* 34)

Shaw's answer to that last question was not only "Yes" but also "It must be so."

Exactly why it "must be so" will be addressed later. For now, we will consider what the individual will has to do with Shaw's secular religion. In the Darwinian scheme, the universe contains life and matter, and life is a product of impersonal matter. As such, life's "status in the universe was that of an outside passenger traveling across the fundamentally alien and hostile environment in which the mindless and the brutal conditioned and determined the living and the spiritual" (Joad 174). Such a scheme is truly atheistic in that it sees "no spiritual force or agency, neither mind, life nor creator" that will interfere with and intervene in the natural processes of existence. Shaw did not like such a view of evolution since it "depended too much on blind chance" (Furlong 154). Instead, he (in his typical fashion) reverses the dogmatic Darwinian assertion, in effect standing it on its head. He does admit that the universe contains life and matter, but asserts that life preceded matter and even created it (Joad 177). Matter is still harsh and brutal, however, and thus is seen as life's "enemy"; in light of this, "life seeks to dominate and subdue" matter (Joad 177) and will "sooner or later" produce what it needs to subdue the material side of existence (Joad 181).

It is *Life*, this vital principle at the back of the universe subduing the brutality of matter, that Shaw postulates as God. Shaw sums it up best in his tract "The New Theology" in a section that deserves to be quoted at length:

What you have got to understand is that somehow or other there is at the back of the universe a will, a life-force. You cannot think of him as a person, you have to think of him as a great purpose, a great will, and, furthermore, you have to think of him as engaged in the continual struggle to produce something higher and higher, to create organs to carry out its purpose.... [Conceive] of the force behind

the universe as a bodiless, impotent force, having no executive power of its own, wanting instruments, something to carry out its will in the world, making all kinds of experiments [in the animal kingdom]...and finally producing man, and then inspiring that man, putting his will into him, getting him to carry out his purpose. (313)

Shaw's continual use of the word "will" should explain the connection between the individual will to live and the Shavian concept of the Life-Force. The apparent ascension of the individual will in the process of social evolution means that the time has come for a thorough and incredible interaction with the Life-Force. Our wills are to be bent to the greater purpose of not our mere individual life but of Life itself.

If you would be a part of this great enterprise of Life realizing itself, then you must be in strong possession of your own will: no material institution or intuition must garner your attention or loyalty. This is what made Shaw such a frustration to his supporters: he would adhere to no manmade system precisely because it was *manmade* (and thus artificial) and a *system* (and thus oppressive). As Bentley put it, "Shaw could never declare anything meaningless. He took sides. And the Vitalist side was the only one he could possibly be on.... [He] is...purely an espousal of free will against determinism, of mind against materialism, [and] above all...the soul...against mechanism" (84-5). The Life-Force must become all; *Life* must become all. For Shaw, it was all. That is why he is a "vitalist" and where he departs from Schopenhauer: both men believed that the will was "the main driving force of human existence"; but whereas Schopenhauer saw the will as "horrifying," Shaw found it "inspiring" (Bentley 73).

Exactly what this great Will of the Life-Force is "inspiring" us towards will be discussed in the sections on humanity and society. For now, let us briefly address why Shaw viewed such a "God" as necessary. The first reason why such a God is necessary is

because of the adequate answer that it gives to the problem of evil. The Life-Force makes its progress like all progress, “by way of trial and error and experiment” (Shaw, “The New Theology” 313). As such, it is prone to mistakes, as should be expected:

Shaw’s God is less personal and less perfect [than the Christian God]. He is much too busy to be interested in counting hairs or watching the fall of sparrows. Above all, He is not yet finished. He is an evolving God, learning, as we learn, by trial and error.... Such was Shaw’s account of the problem of evil. (Bentley 88)

Once one allows imperfection to be the current *status quo* of “God,” evil becomes perfectly explainable (though no less pleasant). Furthermore, evil not only becomes explainable but also acceptable because it is all a part of the process by which the Life-Force evolves into perfection and true Godhood. Again, Shaw puts it best in another lengthy quote:

Numbers of things which are at present killing and maiming us in our own organism have got to be evolved out of that organism, and the process is painful. The object of the whole evolutionary process is to realize God; that is to say, instead of the old notion that creation began with...a personal being, who, being perfect, created something lower than himself, the aim of the New Theology is to turn the process the other way and to conceive of the force behind the universe as working up through imperfection and mistake to a perfect, organized being, having the power of fulfilling its highest purposes.... In that way...we begin to perceive that the evil of the world is a thing that will finally be evolved out of the world, that it was not brought into the world by malice and cruelty, but by an entirely benevolent designer that had not as yet discovered how to carry out its benevolent intention. (“The New Theology” 314)

If we would live life to the fullest, then we must endure pain for a season. Such is the nature of the Shavian apologetic.

The second reason why a Life-Force “God” is (for Shaw) necessary is because of the need for humanity to create its own God. This is in line with Shaw’s view of the will. If we are (or are becoming) a society of Will, then any “God” of such a society must be a product of Will. This is an extension of the old eighteenth century Deist notion that even

if God didn't exist, mankind would still need to invent him. The extension comes in when it is realized that the will that is creating "God" is not the individual will but rather the Will of Life that is working through individuals. "There is no God as yet achieved," writes Shaw, "but there is that force at work making God, struggling through us to become an actual organized existence" ("The New Theology" 314). This creation of God by the Will is Shaw's refutation of the pessimistic nihilism that plagued Western society at the turn of the twentieth century. Life was *the* thing. It should not be discarded or mocked; rather, it should be obeyed and defended against all comers at all cost, even in the face of seemingly inexplicable horrors: "For [Shaw] life is a Promethean adventure which may entail Promethean tortures to be borne with Promethean fortitude" (Bentley 66). This is a definite and fierce optimism, what Chesterton called Shaw's "tragic optimism"; i.e., this Shavian vitalism sees life as "a thing too glorious to be enjoyed. To be is an exacting and exhausting business; the trumpet though inspiring is terrible" (*Shaw* 410).

That Chesterton saw Shaw's optimism as strong yet "tragic" is a result of his own strongly held view of God and first principles. Chesterton was also an optimist, but his version was merry and bright as well as being fierce and terrible. Chesterton completely disagreed with Shaw's religion (and he recognized it as a religion before anyone else dared to), and instead countered with a Christian orthodoxy that has been given a particular Chestertonian shade known as the Philosophy of Gratitude. It was this philosophy that Chesterton used to confront not only the pessimism of the nihilist but also the "tragic optimism" of Shaw.

Chesterton's Philosophy of Gratitude (henceforth Gritudinarianism) was not initially a product of his Christianity. Rather, it was a result of his revulsion towards and subsequent rejection of the cynicism, nihilism, and pessimism that he encountered with the Decadent movement at the Slade School. Chesterton himself confessed that what eventually became his final philosophy initially came with "no real help from religion" (*Autobiography* 98). It was (at the beginning) purely reactionary; and yet it was a rebellion. As Chesterton put it, "When I had been for some time in these, the darkest depths of the contemporary pessimism, I had a strong inward impulse to revolt; to dislodge this incubus or throw off this nightmare" (*Autobiography* 98). His revolt led him away from fundamental cynicism and towards fundamental thankfulness:

Chesterton became convinced that modern culture was a maddening "nightmare" that must be resisted.... Yet if he said "no" to the current climate of opinion, what could he affirm instead? That "yes" is the root of Chestertonian thought.... the principle of gratitude. (Schwartz 41-2)

This "principle of gratitude" is deceptively simple and yet is complex in its implications and assumptions. To put it simply, the "principle of gratitude" states that Being is in itself *good* and therefore should be *praised*. In other words, existence (*ontos*) is (1) better than non-existence and (2) a-rational, since there is no logical reason *why* anything *is* at all. As such, existence is to be praised for its inherent goodness and appreciated for its inherent non-necessity:

I invented a rudimentary and makeshift mystical theory of my own [during the days at Slade]. It was substantially this; that even mere existence, reduced to its most primary limits, was extraordinary enough to be exciting. Anything was magnificent as compared with nothing. Even if the very daylight were a dream, it was a day-dream; it was not a nightmare. (*Autobiography* 98)

Chesterton saw Being as a “cause for celebration” rather than scorn, because “one should be grateful to be at all since there is no reason why one, or anything, should exist” (Schwartz 55).

What should be apparent at this point is the presence of two of the three principles that Chesterton learned as a child: wonder and surprise. These are foundational to Gritudinarianism: existence is a wonder and surprise, and thus we should be thankful for it. Armed with this, Chesterton could confront not only philosophic modernity’s ugliness but also its insanity:

Following predominant pessimism had precipitated the madness of doubting the objective validity of everything. Sanity, then, was grounded in the presence, and hence goodness, of anything.... Chesterton strove to make this fundamental astonishment at, and thankfulness for, the very fact of Being central to cultural consciousness thenceforth. (Schwartz 42)

It must be stressed that Chesterton’s philosophy is not to be confused with mere optimism. It is a kind of optimism, but it is distinct in two ways. The first is that it was grounded in a confrontation with, and acknowledgment of, evil. Chesterton explains:

[During my Slade days,] I dug quite low enough to discover the devil; and even in some dim way to recognize the devil.... When I eventually emerged as a sort of theorist, and was described as an Optimist, it was because I was one of the few people in that world of diabolism who really believed in devils. (*Autobiography* 98)

In fact (as shall be stressed in a moment), the reality of evil is one of the fundamental elements that came to shape Chesterton’s ultimate orthodoxy, for he “already knew too much to pretend to get rid of evil” (Chesterton, *Autobiography* 106).

The second distinction of Chesterton’s optimism was what he called the “mystical minimum of gratitude,” a notion informed by his Protestant grandfather who said (in a fit of Calvinistic enthusiasm) that “he would [still] thank God for his creation [even] if he

were a lost soul” (*Autobiography* 99). The idea is that Chesterton’s optimism was not about seeing *nothing but* goodness, but rather about seeing goodness *at all*:

The pessimist was proud of pessimism, because he thought nothing [was] good enough for him; the optimist was proud of optimism, because he thought nothing was bad enough to prevent him from getting good out of it. There were valuable men of both these types; there were men with many virtues; but they not only did not possess the virtue I was thinking of, but they [also] never thought of it. They would decide that life was no good, or that it had a great deal of good; but they were not in touch with this particular notion, of having a great deal of gratitude even for a very little good. (Chesterton, *Autobiography* 329)

For Chesterton, it was not about seeing goodness everywhere or nowhere but rather *somewhere*. It was to that tiny “thread of thanks” that Chesterton clung to for dear life (Chesterton, *Autobiography* 99).

Exactly how Chesterton went from this “makeshift mystical theory” of his own to Christian orthodoxy is so incredible as to almost be a joke. In fact, Chesterton described the whole thing as a joke, except that it was a joke at his expense (*Orthodoxy* 15). When Chesterton fully theorized his Gritudinarianism (his idea about the “mystical minimum of gratitude” at existence; *Autobiography* 99), he discovered that his own private philosophy was in fact the very orthodoxy of the Christian Church. To put it another way, he found that he was not alone in his position; in asserting his revolt against the madness of pessimism, he was suddenly surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses:

I freely confess all the idiotic ambitions of the end of the nineteenth century. I did, like all other solemn little boys, try to be in advance of the age. Like them I tried to be some ten minutes in advance of the truth. And I found that I was eighteen hundred years behind it. I did strain my voice with a painfully juvenile exaggeration in uttering my truths. And I was punished in the fittest and funniest way, for I have kept my truths: but I have discovered, not that they were not truths, but simply that they were not mine. When I fancied that I stood alone I was really in the ridiculous position of being backed up by all Christendom.... I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches on it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy. (*Orthodoxy* 16)

Christian orthodoxy (specifically Roman Catholicism) filled in a necessary gap in Chesterton's philosophy: existence is a gift, but a gift implies a giver (Schwartz 55). We can be thankful *for* existence, but what is the use of thanks unless there is someone to be thankful *to*? This was a vitally important question for Chesterton. Upon leaving the Slade School, he found himself faced with only three philosophical options: pantheism, atheism, and theism. He rejected pantheism "because he knew, with great relief, that he was not God; he was a creature, not the Creator" (Schwartz 55). This was a matter of "relief" because pantheism (with its making everything God, including the pantheist) lodged on the slippery slope back into solipsism, where the individual is God and the universe their mere creation. This left only atheism and theism: "If God was not Everyone, He must be No One or Someone" (Schwartz 55). Since a gift implies a giver, atheism was invalid; there had to be someone to be thankful to for existence being there. Thus, Chesterton's makeshift philosophy ended in the Catholic orthodoxy of theism.

As stated earlier, this is all deceptively simple. There are deep undercurrents inherent to Gratiitudinarianism as well as very specific consequences to its ideas. There are several principles within it that are equal parts foundation and implication. The first (and perhaps most important) is its Thomism. Chesterton firmly stated that his philosophy was a Thomistic philosophy, and that Thomas Aquinas was fundamentally an optimist in that he did "believe in Life..., the great theorem of the livableness of life" (*Aquinas* 104). Aquinas (like Chesterton) affirmed the goodness of existence in two anti-solipsistic ways: by very simply affirming the *reality* of existence and the *prefer-ability* of existence to non-existence.

As to Thomistic views on the reality of existence, Chesterton put it best with a rather simple yet astounding example:

When a child looks out of the nursery window and sees anything, say the green lawn of the garden, what does he actually know; or does he know anything? There are all sorts of nursery games of negative philosophy played round this question. A brilliant Victorian scientist delighted in declaring that the child does not see grass at all; but only a sort of green mist reflected in a tiny mirror of the human eye.... Men of another school answer that grass is a mere green impression on the mind, and that he can be sure of nothing except the mind.... St. Thomas Aquinas, suddenly intervening in this nursery quarrel, says emphatically that the child is aware of [Being]. Long before he knows that grass is grass, or self is self, he knows that something is something. Perhaps it would be best to say very emphatically (with a blow on the table), “There *is* an Is.” (*Aquinas* 153)

That there “*is* an Is” is the very first rung on the ladder of his philosophy. It is necessary for the reality of gratitude that the gift of life be *real* and not a subjective illusion. Against the pessimistic materialism and nihilism surrounding him, Chesterton’s optimism sounds its first battle cry: *Being exists*.

As to the Thomistic view of existence’s preferability over non-existence, Chesterton again puts it best:

If the morbid Renaissance intellectual is supposed to say, “To be or not to be—that is the question,” then the massive medieval doctor does most certainly reply in a voice of thunder, “To be—that is the answer.” [...] To this question “Is there anything?” St. Thomas begins by answering “Yes”; if he began by answering “No,” it would not be the beginning, but the end. That is what some of us call common sense. (*Aquinas* 104, 137)

The very fact of existence implies a sense of goodness in that it is the basis of all activity. Without existence, there is no action, no loving or hating, “no philosophy, no philosophers, no thinkers, no thought, no anything” (Chesterton, *Aquinas* 137). Existence gives us the very grounds by which we do *anything*, including doubt existence! As such, existence is a good in and of itself. Being exists; and if we have to choose between Being and non-Being, then we should choose Being every time.

Following after these two Thomistic fundamentals comes what are the “first steps” to a proper apprehension of orthodoxy by way of Gratiitudinarianism (Ahlquist, *Apostle* 23). The first is to view reality in the light of the doctrine of the Fall. In short, we must accept the reality of sin:

Modern masters of science are much impressed with the need of beginning all inquiry with a fact. The ancient masters of religion were quite equally impressed with the necessity. They began with the fact of sin—a fact as practical as potatoes.... If it be true (as it certainly is) that a man can feel exquisite happiness in skinning a cat, then the religious philosopher can only draw one of two deductions. He must either deny the existence of God, as all atheists do; or he must deny the present union between God and man, as all Christians do. (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 19)

This acceptance of man’s separation from God is the orthodox Christian answer to the problem of evil. It is also Gratiitudinarianism’s answer to the problem of evil: existence *qua* existence is good, but existence as it currently stands is fallen. In short, existence *is* (which is good), but it isn’t what it *ought* to be (which is bad). This is a paradox; but as we shall see, paradox is not a problem for either Chesterton or his philosophy.

The second step to be taken is the acceptance of the limits of reason. This is not to imply that Chesterton hated and attacked reason. On the contrary, he “never attacks reason but always defends it and is always reasonable in his arguments” (Ahlquist, *Apostle* 24). The point is found in the word *limit*, as it should suggest to us Chesterton’s third childhood principle of limitation, i.e., there is an edge to things beyond which lies the transcendent. Reason cannot penetrate that edge anymore than one’s eyes can penetrate the edge of a picture frame. That is the point: “reason can take us only so far,” and “those who rely solely on reason are setting a trap for themselves” (Ahlquist, *Apostle* 24). Those who do rely “solely” on reason and exclude any and all other epistemological

frameworks (such as imagination and faith) are in grave danger of falling into the madness that plagued the Decadents of the Slade School:

I am not...in any sense attacking logic: I only say that [the] danger does lie in logic.... [R]eason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so make it finite. The result is mental exhaustion... [The] logician seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.... The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason. (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 21, 22, 24)

The world has this definite edge between the physical and spiritual, between the material and immaterial. Reason can map out the expanse of the material, but the edge of the immaterial trips it up every time, mainly because it does not expect it:

The real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite. Life is not an illogicality; yet it is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden; its wildness lies in wait. (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 87)

This hidden and unexpected “wildness” and “inexactitude” is what limits reason, and it is a limitation that we must accept if we are to remain sane.

The third and final step is the acceptance of the concept of paradox. The word “paradox” is tricky as modern usage has made it mean (more often than not) mere nonsense. For Chesterton, however, paradox had a very specific meaning, i.e., the collision of two facts that (1) seem contradictory and yet (2) are both true. On the basis of this definition, Chesterton asserted that Truth (viz., what’s outside the edges) is fundamentally paradoxical (Ahlquist, *Common Sense* 50). As Ahlquist put it, “There is a contradiction at the heart of all things. It is a contradiction that philosophers and logicians cannot explain away. It is a mystery. It is a knot that cannot be untied” (*Apostle* 25). The word “mystery” is important. It can be said (based on Chesterton’s own principles) that

truth is nine-tenths rationally comprehensible and one-tenth mysterious; yet if we want the other nine-tenths to *remain* rational, then we must allow the mystery to remain as well: “The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything becomes lucid” (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 33). Christianity “puts the mystery into [its] philosophy,” and the “darkness” of that mystery “enlightens all things” (Chesterton, *Blatchford* 383). The key idea is that of “truth” versus “consistency.” It is reason alone (“reason in the void”; Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 32) that demands consistency and thereby cracks its head against the vault of heaven. The sane man takes the truth, even if it produces a seeming inconsistency, and by accepting paradox he maintains mental health and clarity:

Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity. The ordinary man has always been sane because the ordinary man has always been a mystic. He has permitted the twilight. He has always had one foot in earth and the other in fairyland. He has always left himself free to doubt his gods; but (unlike the agnostic of today) free also to believe in them. He has always cared more for truth than for consistency. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them. (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 32)

From these three steps we see how orthodoxy completes Chesterton’s philosophy. In allowing for the reality of sin (i.e., existence itself is good, but it isn’t what it ought to be), we can still have thankfulness before the awesome gift of Being while fighting for that gift against its flaws (an issue that will be raised again in the section on society). In allowing for reason to have its limits and for paradox to be at the heart of truth, we allow for the surprise and wonder that is fundamental to Chesterton’s philosophy. In allowing for surprise and wonder by accepting the limits of reason and the centrality of paradox,

we can produce the most essential quality necessary for any adherent of

Gratitudinarianism—*humility*:

Humility was largely meant as a restraint upon the arrogance and infinity of the appetite of man. He was always outstripping his mercies with his newly invented needs. His very power of enjoyment destroyed half his joys. By asking for pleasure, he lost the chief pleasure; for the chief pleasure is surprise. Hence it became evident that if a man would make his world large, he must be always making himself small.... It is impossible without humility to enjoy anything—even pride. (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 36)

Humility is the golden key that unlocks the door to gratitude. It is the means by which we avoid the prison of the nihilistic and solipsistic self and step out into a much wider and more level plain given as a gift by God. It is, in the end, the meek that inherit the earth.

It is on this issue of humility that Chesterton disagrees with Shaw in regard to first principles. This is not to say that he thought Shaw cruel. Chesterton believed that Shaw had a “heroically large and generous heart,” but he also believed that that heart was “not...in the right place” (*Orthodoxy* 35); and in not being in the right place, it missed the essential need of humility, and with it the philosophy of gratitude:

Until we realize that things might not be, we cannot realize that things are. Until we see the background of darkness we cannot admire the light as a single and created thing.... [This] is...the only defect in the greatness of Mr. Shaw..., that he is not easily pleased. He is an almost solitary exception to the general and essential maxim, that little things please great minds. And from this absence [of] humility, comes incidentally the peculiar insistence on the Superman [i.e., the ultimate instrument created by the Will of the Life-Force]. (Chesterton, *Heretics* 69)

Shaw has no true appreciation of life. He sees no “mystical minimum” of goodness in the world because the world has not yet arrived at that goodness. It is (as Chesterton said earlier) a “tragic” optimism: life is to be willed, not enjoyed or praised for itself. Life (for Shaw) is Becoming rather than Being, and as such he cannot have any gratitude towards it because it does not yet fully exist. This is an incredible imbalance. Both Chesterton and

Shaw believe that the world is not as it ought to be and therefore must change. However, whereas Chesterton's belief in the reality of sin allows him to appreciate existence *as* existence while still desiring change, Shaw's insistence is on change alone. There is neither the Fall nor sin; there is simply the trial and error of the Will of Life as it moves towards perfection. Shaw has no humility before existence because existence has not yet arrived at a proper place of worship.

That Shaw's position lacks humility does not seem like a strong objection to it. This is because the real problem with Shaw's faith (as it were) in Will is that Will will fail. Just as reason isolated in the void leads only to morbidity and madness, so Will isolated in the void leads only to paralysis:

This pure praise of volition ends in the same break up and blank as the mere pursuit of logic. Exactly as complete free thought involves doubting thought itself, so the acceptance of mere "willing" really paralyzes the will.... [You] cannot praise an action because it shows will; for to say that is merely to say that it is an action. By this praise of will you cannot really choose one course as better than another. [Thus] the worship of will is the negation of will. To admire choice is to refuse to choose. If Mr. Bernard Shaw comes up to me and says, "Will something," that is tantamount to saying, "I do not mind what you will," and that is tantamount to saying, "I have no will in the matter." You cannot admire will in general, because the essence of will is that it is particular. (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 44)

Will cannot be made a generality because it fundamentally deals in morality, and morality (on the practical level) is a matter of specifics. The idealization of Choice destroys choice because the basis of choice is that some are right and others wrong; but if Choice *itself* is good, then all of them are good and thus are not choices. There is no true decision to be made; there is nothing to choose between. Shaw's worship of the Will is flawed because he never stops to ask himself whether or not the Will that is willing is in fact willing what is good. He claims that it is moving towards perfection, but how can he

know? What is “perfection” in a universe where all choices are equally valid because Choice is the highest good? The answer is that there is no perfection in such a universe because perfection becomes meaningless. According to Chesterton, Shaw’s morbid vitalism ends like the morbid logician and his logic—by shooting itself in the foot.

Chapter 3: Quintessence of Dust (The Question of Human Nature)

The one concept above all other concepts that Shaw is associated with the most is that of the Superman. As stated earlier, the Superman is the ultimate instrument created by the Will of the Life-Force. Through the Superman (or Supermen), the Life-Force can at long last fulfill its will and purpose of acquiring perfection. Thus, Eric Bentley emphatically states, “The creation of Supermen is the greatest task that lies ahead of us, a longer and more arduous task than the socialist revolution” (64). That the task is long and arduous once again speaks to Shaw’s belief in a slow and gradual progress. However, where once the process applied in some general sense to a metaphysical Life-Force, now it applies to the level of the human. Therefore, it is on the issue of the Superman that Shaw’s gaze moves from heaven to earth, serving as the “main link” between his “politics and his religion” (Bentley 80).

A clarification must be made first, however. Shaw most certainly borrowed the idea of the Superman from Nietzsche, but he used it in a different sense. Both men saw the Superman as a man of action. However, for Nietzsche, the Superman was a creature of pure self-will, willing his own sense of right and wrong. Thus, morality is centered in the individual, and all subsequent action was meant for the individual’s benefit. For Shaw, the Superman was a creature bound “in the grip of the Life-Force” (Shaw, *Man and Superman* 203), willing out its progress towards perfection. Thus, morality is centered outside the individual because the good of all is the continued progression of Life, and thus all subsequent action was meant for humanity’s benefit because it was done in the service of Life. Shaw saw Supermen as being realized when “the whole population understands politics and accepts responsibility” towards the advancement of

Life (Bentley 64). This “responsibility” towards Life is what distinguishes Shaw from Nietzsche, who saw Supermen as responsible only for themselves.

The question of responsibility is a key notion because it serves as the cornerstone of Shaw’s sense of morality. “The cardinal virtue in the Shavian scale,” writes Bentley, “is responsibility. Every creed [that] Shaw has attacked he has attacked on grounds of irresponsibility” (65). If mankind does not take responsibility for its actions, viewing them in the light of Life, then they will never attain the heights of the Superman and all that it entails. When it comes to taking responsibility for one’s own actions, one must not let anything or any “creed” stand in the way, whether it be progressivism (which places responsibility on “laws of supply and demand”), Marxism (which places responsibility on “laws of nature”), or Christianity (which places responsibility on “God”) (Bentley 65).

Once again we see how Shaw frustrated his supporters. For Shaw, progress was the thing. However, progress was only possible through responsibility. Thus, whatever impeded responsibility (through deference) equally impeded progress and became Shaw’s enemy. Such enemies not only included reactionary conservatives and Christians but also fellow liberals who idealized him. Apparently, Shaw was so loyal to progress (i.e., his view of progress) that if progress (i.e., someone else’s view of progress) got in the way of it, then progress itself became the enemy! Such was the paradoxical consistency of Mr. Shaw.

The question of creeds brings us to exactly how Shaw expects mankind to take responsibility for its actions. There are two steps to be taken, the first fundamentally negative and the second fundamentally positive. The negative step has already been mentioned: the destruction and discarding of anti-progressive creeds or what Shaw would

call *ideals*. Nothing irritated Shaw more than ideals and idealism, both of which he viewed as “the major deterrent to evolution” (Carpenter 10). This is because the second, positive step in taking responsibility involves the “living will” to be “neither inhibited nor misled by ideals” so that it can fulfill the Will of the Life-Force (Carpenter 10, 11). Thus, the negative side involves the destruction of “outmoded institutions and codes” and the elimination of “the very basis of man’s tendency to cherish ideals,” while the positive side involves the creation of perfection as the individual will “constitutes the growth of the social organism, and thus makes possible the...evolution of man himself” (Carpenter 10, 11).

These negative and positive steps reveal that Shaw saw that true change was only possible when mankind’s circumstances changed. As long as ideals remained intact and unquestioned, humanity would remain in limbo, never moving forward into the initial horrors and ultimate glories of the perfection of Life. If we are to take responsibility for our actions, then our circumstances must change:

What a man is depends on his character; but what he does, and what we think about what he does, depends on his circumstances. The characteristics that ruin a man in one class make him eminent in another. The characters that behave differently in different circumstances behave alike in similar circumstances.... In short, though character is independent of circumstances, conduct is not; and our moral judgments of character are not: both are circumstantial. (Shaw, “First Aid for Critics” 35-6)

As long as ideals remain intact and circumstances remain as they are, change will never come, and the progress of Life necessarily stagnates.

Exactly why Shaw sees ideals as an impediment to evolution deserves a closer look. Ideals, being in some sense a “set of ethical absolutes,” are fundamentally limitations on mankind, in regard to both their mind and will. Such a proposition is

intolerable for Shaw, for such a proposition is (for him) fundamentally deterministic. It is against freedom, which means it is against free will; and the only will that can fulfill the Will of the Life-Force is a will that is free. The mind must be free as well. More so, perhaps, in that the mind is incredibly important to Shaw. Though he saw the will as “distinct from the reasoning machinery” (*Ibsenism* 31), he still saw them as both equally important to the Life-Force: “The human will, man’s link with the cosmic force, channels the evolutionary impulse...[and] looks for the most efficient way to fulfill the will” (Carpenter 13). Thus, the mind is equally one of the needful means by which the progress of Life can be fulfilled. In fact, mind is the main instrument by which the Will of the Life-Force will bring about its greatest changes (including the Superman):

[Man] cannot fulfill his will simply by following its promptings blindly.... [It] needs a brain to steer it to its goal. Shaw is convinced that the mind has the capacity to direct the will at once successfully and economically. [Reason] does not determine the destination, but it searches for the shortest way. (Carpenter 11, 12)

The creation of mind was a watershed moment in the history of creative evolution, for now there was not only guidance outside of matter but also inside of matter. There were now creatures that could reason, and by “accurate reasoning only [both within and without matter] can we calculate our actions so as to do what we intend to do; that is, to fulfill our will” (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 33). The Life-Force had constructed for itself a kindred spirit to aid in its aims, for two heads are better than one. Therefore, to “carry on its work effectively, the mind must [also] free itself from illusory ideals” that would hamper it with limitations (Carpenter 12).

Shaw’s dislike of limitations is a product of his revulsion against determinism. As a vitalist, believing in the primacy of Life and the necessity of its freedom to evolve,

Shaw saw determinism (both of the secular and sacred brands) as anathema (Shaw, “Preface to *Heartbreak House*” 446-7). Nothing can tell Life what it “ought” to be since what it “ought” to be has not yet been reached. Determinism was the attempt to artificially end the race to perfection by creating an imaginary goal line that had already been crossed in the distant past. For Shaw, such a notion was damnable as well as ridiculous; it kept mankind in a perpetual state of imperfection. Shaw’s sentiment was the same as Don Juan’s in Hell: “I tell you that as long as I can conceive something better than myself I cannot be easy unless I am striving to bring it into existence or clearing the way for it” (*Man and Superman* 165). Determinism would say that there is nothing “better”; we have reached a static equilibrium, and any and all motions are merely a continuance of that equilibrium and therefore meaningless. Against such philosophic petrification, Shaw firmly set his face:

Being a poet, Shaw could never declare anything meaningless. He took sides. And the Vitalist side was the only one he could possibly be on. He became the willing champion of Buffon, Lamarck, and Butler against Darwin, Huxley, and Weismann. Shaw’s is so purely an espousal of free will against determinism, of mind against materialism, above all [the soul] against mechanism, that there is scarcely any need to follow him into specific biological arguments. (Bentley 84-5)

For Shaw, there was no determinism. There was only Life moving ever upwards and onwards. Humanity was a part of that movement, not as a passive observer, but as an active participant. In taking responsibility for one’s actions by freeing the will and mind from petrifying circumstances, humanity could usher in the next stage of evolution: the Superman, who could continue Life’s continual march. Such was Shaw’s view of humanity (both as it is and as it could be), though Chesterton perhaps summed it up the best:

In the ordinary sense it would be specially absurd to suggest that Shaw desires man to be a mere animal.... But there is a mystical sense in which one may say literally that Shaw desires man to be an animal. That is, he desires him to cling first and last to life, to the spirit of animation, to the thing that is common to him and the birds and plants. Man should have the blind faith of a beast: he should be as mystically immutable as a cow, and as deaf to sophistries as a fish. Shaw does not wish him to be a philosopher or an artist: he does not even wish him to be a man, so much as he wishes him to be, in this holy sense, an animal. He must follow the flag of life as fiercely from conviction as all other creatures follow it from instinct. (*Shaw* 455)

Now, Chesterton (being as consistent in his thinking as Shaw) derived his view of humanity from Gratitudeism, and namely from two key points: the goodness of existence *qua* existence and the reality of sin. Insofar as a human is a created being, he or she is good and valuable because of that; however, insofar as a human is a sinner, he or she is in need of restoration *because* their humanity is good and valuable. Such is the main way that Chesterton's philosophy addresses the question of humanity. There are other points, though, that must be stressed because there are many issues about humanity with which Chesterton superficially agrees with Shaw. Both men are optimists in that they believe in life. Both men are vehemently against all forms of determinism. There is still, however, a fundamental difference that drives a chasm between the two with regard to mankind, and it is to that difference that we shall now turn our attention.

As a man of letters, Chesterton was "part of a broader movement in reaction and opposition to the mechanistic and dehumanizing aspects of the scientism and commercial industrialism" at the turn of the twentieth century (Peters 14). This was because of scientism and industrialism's reductionistic (in addition to their deterministic) qualities: in the same way that they had created an imaginary goal line in the past, they reduced every man and woman to that goal line and nothing else:

Once you have [reduced everyone's nature] on the cosmic level, your mind will naturally gravitate to reductionist explanations of more limited topics, i.e., reducing all human motivation and behavior to sex (Freudianism), economics (Marxism), conditioning (Behaviorism), or power (Nietzsche). (Williams 19)

Against this reductionism, Chesterton asserted the inherent uniqueness (and subsequent value) of human beings. To put it another way, he tried to focus, not on humans in the abstract, but humans in the actual world. He saw collectivism as “the great danger” of the twentieth century precisely because it will necessarily “reduce men to the simple status of workers, voters, or other such abstractions” (Wills 197). Here Chesterton's love of limits is “reacting against the broad evolutionary, progressive, relativist blurring of distinctions” (Peters 116). Human beings are beyond paraphrase. There are true and unique distinctions to be made with regard to humanity, distinctions that are there for the asking if only we had eyes to see them.

What Chesterton means by the distinctions of humanity (as well as being able to see those distinctions) is similar to Gerard Manly Hopkins's concept of *inscape*, i.e., “the distinctive design that constitutes individual identity” (Greenblatt 1514). Each thing in existence, being created by God, has an individual identity that relates back to Him in either general ways (such as nature; Romans 1:19-20) or specific ones (such as the *imago dei* of humanity). As Garry Wills puts it, “All things share a common being [from God], yet this existence is different from each thing's essence. [Something] *is*, [and thus] shines with God's secret and inmost glory; but [something] is [something], and therefore limits that reality” (45-6). Chesterton's response to the collectivist/reductionist is to view humanity in the light of not only its existence (which coming from God is therefore good), but also its essence (i.e., its uniqueness, which is also good). To see the “distinctive design” of an individual being's identity is a process called *instress*, i.e., the

“apprehension of an object in an intense thrust of energy toward it that enables one to realize [its] specific distinctiveness” (Greenblatt 1515). Chesterton believed this as well, holding that “human behavior can be understood much better through the window of the soul than through the strictly rational-empirical methods of positive science” (Peters 21). If one is to truly see humanity (as if for the first time), then one must choose a different window than reason in the void, and that window is to view humanity as human.

Chesterton asserted quite defiantly that if one would simply strip himself or herself of all the preconceived and simplistic scientific notions about humanity and simply stare with the eyes of one’s soul at humanity, one would be thunderstruck at the prodigy that a human being is. The uniqueness of a human being, with all his or her complexities and contradictions, makes reductionism and collectivism impossible. A man is no mere “animal” anymore than he is a mere “worker” or a mere *anything*. What we call “human” is actually a surprising and shocking thing, a “prodigy and a mystery among the animals” (Peters 30). The only way we can avoid reducing and collecting humanity into abstract masses is to see humanity afresh. “If,” says Chesterton, “[we have] lost the sane vision [of man], [then we] can only get it back by something very like a mad vision; that is, by seeing man as a strange animal and realizing how strange an animal he is” (*Everlasting Man* 16).

Chesterton took great pains to paint this mad yet sane vision of humanity. Some of his most beautiful (yet rational) passages attempt to present humanity, not in any reductionistic light, but in its own light. He asks, quite simply, that we seriously just *look* at the thing:

To see man as he is, it is necessary once more to keep close to that simplicity that can clear itself of accumulated clouds of sophistry. The simplest truth about man

is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than a mere growth of this one. He has an unfair advantage and disadvantage. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of a cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations. Alone among the animals, he is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter.... Whether we praise these things as natural to man or abuse them as artificial in nature, they remain in the same sense unique. (*Everlasting Man* 36)

Even the most trivial things (from clothing to laughing) are put forth as something strange precisely because they are *human*. Every element mentioned truly demonstrates that humans are “alone among the animals.”

Though Chesterton could write sketches like the one above all day, there were two specific things that he emphasized over all the others, two elements so unique to humanity that they make us the most bizarre “animal” of them all. The first is *imagination*. The second is *free will*. In truth, the former could be called “free will in the abstract,” and the latter could be called “imagination in practice.” This is because both of these elements spring from the same source: humans (again alone amongst the animals) are *creators*.

Chesterton saw “our imagination and our arts” as what defined us as humans. Of all the chasms etched between men and beast, there is none deeper than this one. Birds and elephants have homes just as we have homes, and yet they don’t. They do not decorate them for decoration’s sake (or at all), nor do they develop aerial or elephantine forms of architecture. They do not build mausoleums to house the remains of famous poets and scholars because they have none. They do not have statues to honor politicians or venerate saints because they have none of those either. Humanity alone has populated

the world with very un-utilitarian monstrosities that no animal (in its instinctual quest for survival) would ever dream of conceiving. That is a gap that has not and cannot be crossed. That is the key to Chesterton's most oft quoted phrase: "Art is the signature of man" (*Everlasting Man* 34):

It is the simple truth that man does differ from the brutes in kind and not degree; and the proof of it is here; that it sounds like a truism to say that the most primitive man drew a picture of a monkey and that it sounds like a joke to say that the most intelligent monkey drew a picture of a man. Something of division and disproportion has appeared; and it is unique. (34)

This presence of imagination, this capacity for wild mental exaggeration and limitation that brings about the genesis of genuine inspiration and creation, is a part of the *inscape* of humanity, a part of our unique identity that ties us back to God: "Because we are created in the image of God, we also are creators" (Ahlquist, *Common Sense* 54).⁴

With regard to free will, Chesterton despised determinism just as much as Shaw, but for deceptively similar yet fundamentally different reasons. Both men disliked the idea of telling a human being that he was incapable of doing or being something, that he had no choice in the matter (whatever the matter was). The difference is that Shaw disliked determinism because it set limitations. Chesterton (who loved limitations) disliked determinism because free will was intrinsic to the uniqueness of humanity, and thus an attack on it was an attack on humanity itself:

Man that is born of a woman has short days and full of trouble; but he is a nobler and happier being than this would make him out. I will not deign to answer [those who ask] "how" a man born in filth and sin can live a noble life. I know so many that are doing it, within a stone's throw of my own house...that I care little how it is done. Man has something in him always which is not conquered by conditions. Yes, there is a liberty that has never been chained. There is a liberty that has made

⁴ It needs to be noted here that although Chesterton never actually used the word "inscape," it should be obvious that Gratiitudinarianism (with its focus on the unique and individual nature of any given thing) is explicitly inscapist. Chesterton was obviously influenced by inscapism, though the influence may very well have been unconscious.

men happy in dungeons, as it may make them happy in slums. It is the liberty of the mind.... (*Blatchford* 394)

For Chesterton, humanity *qua* humanity is the thing. It is true that we are fallen and thus in need of a remedy; but that remedy will not deny or destroy humanity, for God created humanity and pronounced it good.

It is on this point of the goodness of humanity *qua* humanity that Chesterton and Shaw sharply part ways over the question of human nature, and it is here that Chesterton offers his main criticism of the idea of the Superman. That main criticism is basically this: Shaw claims (very sincerely) to want to save humanity; but the remedy that he proposes will only destroy it. It will destroy humanity, says Chesterton, because Shaw (in spite of himself) hates human beings.

The first way Shaw unintentionally hates humanity is in how the religion of the Life-Force has robbed the world of romance, i.e., of adventure. This is in connection to the reality of sin. For Chesterton, sin is equally a reality to be acknowledged and an abnormality to be fought. In this way, humanity is given adventure. Wills explains:

The concept of adventure is that of a good thing endangered, a thing only to be saved by risk.... Chesterton explored how compactly this attitude sums up the proper relation of man to existence: being is an undoubted good which is challenged by indubitable evils; only by fighting for the one and against the others can the value of existence be realized. (148)

In the light of original sin, life is a battle and thus an adventure. There is no such light for Shaw. For him, sin is merely the expected byproduct of Life trying to work its way to perfection. We are merely tools in Life's hands, tools that it may misuse or break in its quest to realize itself. Despite Bentley's claims to the contrary, life in the Shavian scheme is not a Promethean adventure; it is simply a drudgery and a terror:

To every man and woman, bird, beast, and flower, life is a love-call to be eagerly followed. To Bernard Shaw it is merely a military bugle to be obeyed.... He paints life at its darkest and then tells the babe unborn to take a leap in the dark. That is heroic...but it is the heroism of a morbid and almost asphyxiated age. It is awful to think that this world which so many poets have praised has even for a time been depicted as a man-trap into which we may just have the manhood to jump. Think of all those ages through which men have talked of having the courage to die. And then remember that we have actually fallen to talking about having the courage to live. (Chesterton, *Shaw* 456)

Chesterton presents life to humanity as something worth dying for. Shaw, however, presents Life as something that will kill you. In an incredibly twisted paradox, the vitalist has made Life itself the greatest threat of all and has robbed men of the joy of living.

The second way that Shaw unintentionally hates humanity is that he does not love humanity *qua* humanity. He does not want humankind. He would as soon throw every man, woman, and child in the trash bin. What he wants is the Superman, before which all mankind must bow and be sacrificed; yet in exalting the Superman, Shaw has revealed a fatal contradiction. Shaw set himself up to be the enemy of ideals, asking that no ideal should restrain the will and mind of mankind; but the truth is that he has “always had a secret ideal that has withered all the things of this world,” and that ideal is the Superman himself (Chesterton, *Heretics* 67). Before this ideal, all men are chained and bound. Before this ideal, all men are deemed worthless:

The truth is that Mr. Shaw has never seen things as they really are. If he had he would have fallen on his knees before them.... It is not seeing things as they are to think first of Briareus with a hundred hands, and then call every man a cripple for only having two. It is not seeing things as they are to start with a vision of Argus with his hundred eyes, and then jeer at every man with his two eyes as if he had only one. And it is not seeing things as they are to imagine a demi-god of infinite moral clarity, who may or may not appear in the latter days of the earth, and then to see all men as idiots.... Mr. Shaw, on the practical side perhaps the most humane man alive, is in this sense inhumane. (Chesterton, *Heretics* 67-8)

For Chesterton, life is a thing to be fought for, not a terror stalking in the night. Likewise, humanity is also a thing to be fought for, not scrapped in the face of a nonexistent abstraction. As stated earlier, Shaw is indeed not easily pleased: “Having come to doubt whether humanity can be combined with progress, most people, easily pleased, would have elected to abandon progress and remain with humanity. Mr. Shaw, not being easily pleased, decides to throw over humanity...and go in for progress for its own sake”

(Chesterton, *Heretics* 69). For Chesterton, such an exchange is intolerable, for

the thing which is valuable...is man—the old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, sensual, respectable man. And the things that have been founded on this creature immortally remain; the things founded on the fancy of the Superman have died with dying civilizations which alone have given them birth. (*Heretics* 70)

In the name of this creature called man, Chesterton stands as a vigilant guard against all comers, including the respectable Mr. Shaw.

Chapter 4: The Greater Good (The Question of Society and the Arts)

To assess the question of society and the arts in the light of Shaw and Chesterton is to necessarily turn to the question of reform. As was asserted in the beginning, both men wanted reform. Both knew that the world was wrong, that it was in dire straits and needed to be set on stable ground. The difference was in their solutions, and the difference in their solutions came from their difference about who or what was the culprit responsible for the current mess of the world. Exactly whom each man fingers as the culprit will shape this final section, and each man's view can be begun with a parable.

For Shaw, ideals were the culprit. As stressed in the above pages, ideals imprison and bind the will and mind of humanity and thus are the antithesis of freedom. Shaw expressed this sentiment very clearly in what can be called the Parrot Parable:

If we have come to think that [ideals] are [right for people], we have done so exactly as English children come to think that a cage is the natural sphere of a parrot: because they have never seen one anywhere else. No doubt there are Philistine parrots who agree with their owners that it is better to be in a cage than out, so long as there is plenty of hempseed and Indian corn there. There may even be idealist parrots who persuade themselves that the mission of a parrot is to minister to the happiness of a private family by whistling and saying Pretty Polly, and that it is in the sacrifice of its liberty to this altruistic pursuit that a true parrot finds the supreme satisfaction of its soul. I will not go so far as to affirm that there are theological parrots who are convinced that imprisonment is the will of God because it is unpleasant; but I am confident that there are rationalist parrots who can demonstrate that it would be a cruel kindness to let a parrot out to fall prey to cats.... Still, the only parrot a free-souled person can sympathize with is the one that insists on being let out as the first condition of making itself agreeable. A selfish bird, you may say: one that puts its own gratification before that of the family which is so fond of it.... All the same, you respect that parrot in spite of your conclusive reasoning; and if it persists, you will have either to let it out or kill it. (*Ibsenism* 56)

The moral of the story is that until mankind casts off all ideals, all sense of “duty” to “society” or “the law” or “everyone but” themselves, they will never be emancipated (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 56); and unless there is emancipation, there will never be reform.

Shaw's replacement for ideals is ideas. Ideals are arbitrary strictures that petrify into authoritarianism and petrify humanity with it. Ideas, however, are the "stepping stones of progress" (Carpenter 12), fresh directions and dynamic forces that can bring about true change. Ideas, along with the will and the mind, form the "fundamental ingredients of Shaw's ethical aims" for society (Carpenter 13):

First, Shaw attempts to eliminate the main obstruction that the will encounters, [i.e.,] man's sense of duty to established moral codes. Second, he tries to strengthen and refine the human brain so that it will become as efficient an instrument of the will as possible. And third, he seeks to supply men's minds with ideas which might prove useful in the process of evolution. (13)

Of course, the main ideas that Shaw will "supply" will be about the Life-Force and the Superman; but the main point still stands: *any* fresh idea is better than old oppressive ideals.

Now, it is true that Shaw saw poverty as the "greatest of [societal] evils" and the "worst of [societal] crimes" ("First Aid" 15); but his critique of society extended far beyond a mere socialistic consideration of the poor. For him, poverty was a mere symptom of a greater disease: society *itself*. Poverty was but one bird cage in a much larger arboretum: "The point to seize is that social progress takes effect through the replacement of old institutions by new ones" and not merely putting out individual fires (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 28). Thus, reform needs to begin on a much larger, more fundamental level. In commenting on his own play, *Major Barbara*, Shaw explained that the poisons of society necessitated an overhaul of society itself:

[Barbara discovers] that she is her father's accomplice; that the Salvation Army is the accomplice of the distiller and the dynamite maker; that they can no more escape one another than they can escape the air they breathe; that there is no salvation in personal righteousness, but only through the redemption of the whole nation from its vicious, lazy, competitive anarchy. ("First Aid" 27)

The current elements of society cannot save society, because society (as Shaw points out) is complicit “in its own evils” (Weintraub, “Introduction to Shaw” 38). The “vicious, lazy, competitive anarchy” that mars everything is a product of society’s own ideals and idealism, whether it is the theology of the Salvation Army or the capitalism of Andrew Undershaft. These ideals must be eliminated so as to free the will and mind of mankind to be receptive to the ideas of evolutionary progress, and that will mean an overhaul of society itself.

What has been hinted at so far is that within the mind’s consideration of all ideas on hand, the best ones will be selected (i.e., the ones “which might prove useful in the process of evolution”). This makes sense if we remember that the Life-Force (in its process of creative evolution) creates what it needs to continue its progression. It has (more or less) selected what is “useful” for its evolution. Shaw presents ideas as the next “useful” thing and is confident in the power of the right ideas, a confidence that he presents in direct opposition to any form of determinism. Regardless of one’s “*libido* or economic class,” the right idea (because of its truthfulness) will be accepted once it is “sufficiently ventilated” (Joad 62). Shaw “believes in the power of ideas,” i.e., “that if men’s reasons [*sic*] are convinced, then their wills will tend to impel them to take the actions which are appropriate to their convictions” (Joad 63). Once you convince men’s minds, no deterministic factor can stop the will from doing what is necessary.

Exactly how Shaw believes the mind becomes convinced is where we turn to the issue of the arts. As a dramatist and art critic, Shaw had very specific notions about what art was for. For him, art was a medium or venue for the expression and “ventilation” of

ideas. Shaw saw that “the art-gallery was the church of modern times” and “the theatre a cathedral” (Bentley 120). Thus, art (especially the theater) was a tool for social change.

A Shavian play is not a play at all, but rather a sermon, a sermon full of “arguments” and “demonstrations” that form “a case against ideals” (Carpenter 18). Shaw most certainly saw himself as a preacher of this type. In his preface to *Man and Superman*, he asserts his high and holy calling to his friend Arthur Walkley:

It is your favorite jibe at me that what I call drama is nothing but explanation. But you must not expect me to adopt your inexplicable, fantastic, petulant, fastidious ways: you must take me as I am, a reasonable, patient, consistent, apologetic, laborious person, with the temperament of a schoolmaster and the pursuits of a vestryman.... [My] conscience is the genuine pulpit article: it annoys me to see people comfortable when they ought to be uncomfortable; and I insist on making them think in order to bring them to conviction of sin. (8)

The issue of “comfort” is an important one. In Shaw’s time, the “great majority of the playgoing public...would have assumed that a play should be designed primarily to give the audience pleasure” (Carpenter 14). Shaw was against such a view:

I cannot avoid compromising my credit for artistic feeling in the eyes of those reactionists who declare that moral considerations are outside the sphere of art; that the sole function of the artist is to please; that art should be pursued for its own sake. At this hour in the evening I think I may dismiss those who assert that moral considerations are outside any sphere of human activity as...inconsiderate persons. (“Fiction and Truth” 17)

When it is a question of right and wrong, of “conviction of sin,” pleasure is not the way to go. Shaw instead felt it best to cause pain, pain caused by an assault on the ideals of the audience:

The purpose of early [and even late] Shavian drama...has little to do with pleasing the audience. The total effect that Shaw usually intends is something closer to torment than pleasure, although it will depend upon the individual spectator’s attitude towards the ideals under attack. Whatever ideals the spectator believes in, consciously or not, may become Shaw’s targets. (Carpenter 16)

Shaw's strategy was to "make [the audience] uncomfortable" and thus "aware of their complicity in the social crime" (Meisel 105). This is what Shaw called "sharpshooting at the audience" i.e., "trapping them, fencing them in, [and] aiming always at the sorest spot in their consciences" (*Ibsenism* 183). Shaw saw such painful measures as necessary for progress: "The plain working truth is that it is not only good for people to be shocked occasionally, but absolutely necessary to the progress of society that they should be shocked pretty often" (*Ibsenism* 153). It is in this way, the way of shock and pain, that the "destroyer of ideals" can sweep "the world clear of lies" (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 57).

Thus, the basis of Shavian drama (especially Shavian comedy) and all proper art is *conflict*, specifically, the confrontation between the Life-Force and ideals. It is argumentative and didactic, for Shaw believed "great art can never be anything" but didactic ("Preface: *Pygmalion*" 331); it is to be a "destructive, derisory, critical, negative" force "in revolt against falsehood and imposture" ("Preface: *Back to Methuselah*" 585-6). By setting up a struggle between "human vitality and artificial system," between "the inner light of genuine conscience and healthy impulse [i.e., ideas] against conventional ethics" (Bentley 130), Shaw brings an audience into the painful sphere of re-evaluating their ideals so as to repent of them; and the fruit of such repentance is reformation:

[We must insist] that there is no golden rule; that conduct must justify itself by its effect upon life and not by its conformity to any rule or ideal. And since life consists in the fulfillment of the will, which is constantly growing, and cannot be fulfilled today under the conditions which secured its fulfillment yesterday, [we] claim afresh the old Protestant right of private judgment in questions of conduct against all institutions. (Shaw, *Ibsenism* 156-7)

By stimulating "private judgment" to a state of "uneasiness and unresolved stresses" about the way things are, there will occur a "permanent change in consciousness bearing on social change" (Meisel 99). Until such repentance occurs, however, until

“governments abandon their reverence for outmoded institutions which prevent urgent social problems from being solved soon after they arise,” it is the duty of the artist to make a nuisance of themselves by publishing and preaching the propaganda and doctrine of the Life-Force (Carpenter 24). Once again, Chesterton sums up Shaw nicely on this point:

Bernard Shaw cares nothing for art; in comparison with morals, literally nothing. Bernard Shaw is a Puritan and his work is Puritan work. He has all the essentials of the old, virile and extinct Protestant type. In his work he is as ugly as a Puritan. He is as indecent as a Puritan. He is full of gross words and sensual facts as a sermon of the seventeenth century. (*Shaw* 431)

There is, perhaps, no issue on which Chesterton is more diametrically opposed to Shaw than the question of what is wrong with society and how to fix it. It is true that Shaw was a Fabian Socialist and Chesterton a Catholic Distributist, and therefore they disagreed with regard to economic policy⁵; but there was a deeper, more fundamental issue at stake for Chesterton than how property was to be owned. It was on the point of ideals that Chesterton swung 180 degrees away from Shaw; for although Shaw saw ideals as the problem, Chesterton saw them as the solution. For Chesterton, the fact was not that ideals *needed* to be abandoned, but that they had *already been* abandoned, and that that abandonment was the source of all societal ills. Obviously, then, the solution was a return to ideals.

Ideals are key for Chesterton and his view of social change. They alone can save society because they alone provide the framework and grounding necessary to perform

⁵ The key difference between these two views is very subtle. Strictly speaking, both views believe in a kind of economic distribution. The difference is that whereas socialism wants the government to take ownership of and distribute *things* (money or material goods) equally amongst the populace, distributism wants *ownership* to be the thing that is distributed.

any reasonable action correctly, including the creation of a society. Chesterton expressed this sentiment in what can be called the Lamppost Parable:

Suppose that a great commotion arises in the street about something, let us say a lamppost. A grey-clad monk, who is the spirit of the Middle Ages, is approached upon the matter, and begins to say, in the arid manner of the Schoolmen, “Let us first of all consider, my brethren, that value of Light. If Light be in itself good—” At this point he is somewhat excusably knocked down. All the people make a rush for the lamppost, the lamppost is down in ten minutes, and they go about congratulating each other on their unmediaeval practicality. But as things go on they do not work out so easily. Some people have pulled the lamppost down because they wanted the electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness, because their deeds were evil. Some thought it not enough of a lamppost, some too much; some acted because they wanted to smash municipal machinery; some because they wanted to smash something. And there is war in the night, no man knowing whom he strikes. So, gradually and inevitably, today, tomorrow, or the next day, there comes back the conviction that the monk was right after all, and that all depends on what is the philosophy of Light. Only what we might have discussed under the gas-lamp, we now must discuss in the dark. (*Heretics* 46)

We cannot go about smashing society unless we have a proper philosophy of Light, i.e., a proper ideal about what is right and wrong. Until we are clear about what *ought* to be, we cannot even begin to reform society on any level:

The whole difficulty in our public problems is that some men are aiming at cures which other men would regard as [a]...disease.... This is the arresting and dominant fact about modern social discussion: that the quarrel is not merely about the difficulties, but about the aim. We agree about evil; it is about the good that we should tear each other’s eyes out. (Chesterton, *What’s Wrong* 16-7)

The problem with society is not the presence of an ideal but rather the presence of so many ideals that no one knows which one to set society upon. They are arguing over lampposts without addressing the issue of Light. “What is wrong” with society, notes Chesterton, “is that we do not ask what is right” (*What’s Wrong* 17).

Of course, Chesterton saw Christian orthodoxy as “what is right,” but he would much rather people have some sort of ideal than none at all. This is because idealism is

the only way to get things done, the only way that things *have* been done: “In practice, the habit of generalizing and idealizing did not [in any sense] mean worldly weakness. The time of big theories was the time of big results” (Chesterton, *What’s Wrong* 43). Generalizations and idealizations get things done, and the startling reason why they get things done is because (*contra* Shaw and most anyone else) they are incredibly practical:

Idealism is only considering everything in its practical essence. Idealism only means that we should consider a poker in reference to poking before we discuss its suitability for wife-beating; that we should ask if an egg is good enough for practical poultry-rearing before we decide that the egg is bad enough for practical politics. (Chesterton, *What’s Wrong* 19)

If we had a theory of Light, then we could know what to do with the lamppost. Likewise, if we only had an Ideal about society, then we could begin to change society. Until we know what a thing is for, we will neither use it properly nor return it to its proper use.

This idea of practical idealism flies right in the face of Shaw’s tragic optimism, which has at bottom a staunch progressivism. Progressivism basically “assumes that change is for the better” (Peters 73). Even if that change is full of evil and travesty (as in Shaw’s idea of creative evolution), it is still good because it is moving us higher and higher than we were before. Whether the height we are reaching will be a matter of ascension or vertigo is never discussed. It is assumed from the beginning that progress is an ascent. As such, everything “lower” is to be left behind: “People [begin] to consider any and every change to be progress...[and] welcome all change as necessarily good and to disparage all traditions as outmoded and bad” (Peters 144). Chesterton was against this. On all points, he held that the only way forward was backwards, that “advance is return” (Wills 255), and that only idealism can produce a societal revolution:

This is the only really healthy way with the word evolution, [i.e.,] to work for what you want, and to call *that* evolution. The only intelligible sense that progress

or advance can have among men, is that we have a definite vision, and that we wish to make the whole world like that vision.... Now here comes the whole collapse and huge blunder of our age. We have mixed up two different things, two opposite things. Progress should mean that we are always changing the world to suit the vision. Progress does mean (just now) that we are always changing the vision.... We are not altering the real to suit the ideal. We are altering the ideal: it is easier. (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 112)

This is where Chesterton thoroughly breaks with Shaw. As was demonstrated earlier, Shaw does have an ideal: the Superman. Chesterton's problem with this ideal (aside from its inherent contradiction as being an ideal that is against ideals) is that (1) it would do away with the only means (i.e., ideals) to really bring about change and (2) it does not have a proper view of evil. The reality of sin, having already shaped Chesterton's view of existence and mankind, equally shapes his view of society. We are never going to change society unless we see its defects, not as inevitable slip-ups on the road to perfection, but as evils to be fought:

God [in creating the universe] had written... a play; a play he had planned to be perfect, but which had necessarily been left to human actors and stage-managers, who had since made a great mess of it.... In this way at least one could be both happy and indignant without degrading one's self to be either a pessimist or an optimist. On this system one could fight all the forces of existence without abandoning the flag of existence. One could be at peace with the universe and yet be at war with the world. (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 84)

As long as we view ideals as obstructions to be discarded and evil as an inevitable part of the process, there will never be any reform. If we want to know what to do with the lamppost, we need a theory of Light and of Darkness: "Without the doctrine of the Fall all idea of progress is unmeaning.... Unless there is a standard you cannot tell whether you are rising or falling" (Chesterton, *Blatchford* 385). Adam Schwartz summed the point up this way:

Belief in original sin gave impetus to Chesterton's ideas about rebellion. He had long feared that both optimism and pessimism produce quietism, either by

asserting that no change is needed, or that any change is pointless.... To Chesterton, the gift of existence establishes a primary, unconditional loyalty to Being. Recognition of its essential goodness stimulates love of it and that love, in turn, fosters hatred of its flaws and a wish to correct them.... Change, then, is both desirable and possible. Yet this change must take a specific shape. As Chesterton would insist consistently, reform implies form. (67-8)

The purpose of art in all this is to remind us of the ideals that we have forgotten and failed to live up to. We have all fallen away from Eden. We all want Eden again; and only art can remind us of its glories: “At the back of our brains, so to speak, there was a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life [then] was to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder” (Chesterton, *Autobiography* 99). The artist is to dig for this “submerged sunrise,” to “help people to discover the glory they have lost” (Peters 51). When once we catch sight of the glory that we once knew, we will find ourselves empowered (by the mere remembrance of it) to establish it once again. When we finally catch the vision, we will finally change the world:

The only true free-thinker is he whose intellect is as much free from the future as from the past. He cares little for what will be as for what has been; he cares only for what ought to be. And for my present purpose I specially insist on this abstract independence. If I am to discuss what is wrong, one of the first things that are wrong is this: the deep and silent modern assumption that past things have become impossible. There is one metaphor of which the moderns are very fond; they are always saying, “You can’t put the clock back.” The simple and obvious answer is “You can.” A clock, being a piece of human construction, can be restored by the human finger to any figure or hour. In the same way society, being a piece of human construction, can be reconstructed upon any plan that has ever existed. (Chesterton, *What’s Wrong* 33)

We can change society, but we must first pick a plan, a plan that believes in loving existence and hating its flaws. For Chesterton, Christian orthodoxy (with its memory of Eden and the Fall) was that plan; and once we lose that plan, everything else goes with it:

Man, by blind instinct, knew that if once things were wildly questioned, reason could be questioned first. The authority of priests to absolve, the authority of popes to define the authority, even of inquisitors to terrify: these were all only dark defenses erected round one central authority, more undemonstrable, more supernatural than them all—the authority of a man to think.... In so far as religion is gone, reason is going.... In the act of destroying the idea of Divine authority we have largely destroyed the idea of that human authority by which we do a long-division sum. With a long and sustained tug we have attempted to pull the mitre off pontifical man; and his head has come off with it. (*Orthodoxy* 39)

Orthodoxy gives groundwork for everything (e.g., reason) by giving shelter to it. It sees everything as valuable and worth fighting for, even to the point of blood if necessary.

Because it values all of existence (including wild cards like free-thinking), then for Chesterton it is the only proper plan for any successful society.

Conclusion

The turn of the twentieth century produced many vile and virulent dragons, but it also produced various knights in response. Chesterton and Shaw stand out as two of the finest: the wittiest, the staunchest, the kindest, and the most honest. If there is one thing that the world always needs, it is people who speak bluntly. When the world is losing its mind, it needs to be told so, preferably by people who have kept their own heads. When everything has become bent out of shape, we need someone who thinks in clear, straight lines. Both Chesterton and Shaw were clear thinkers who (in all deference to their opponents) knew that they were right. On that confidence, they eagerly drew swords against the world.

It is unfortunate, however, that they equally drew swords against each other. Both men wanted to save the world. To use Chesterton's terms, both men recognized and loathed the disease; however, they both had different ideas about the cure. For Shaw, the Superman was the only cure. Until we advance in the next stage of Life's evolution, we will continue to stagnate in poverty, crimes, and world wars. Shaw believed that only by drastic steps (unfortunately, even *eugenic* steps) could we finally move away from the dead institutions that hold us down. They have served their purpose; a greater purpose is calling. Let us then forget those things that are behind and press toward the mark of the high calling of Life.

For Chesterton, orthodoxy was the only cure. Until we return to fixed and absolute principles, we will never move forward into the perilous and unpredictable future. Furthermore, it is not just any principles that we should adhere to, but the principles of the Christian religion: that God made the world and pronounced it good, that

mankind has fallen and needs to be redeemed, and that no progress is possible unless we have a clear view of where we came from (viz., Eden) and what stands in our way (i.e., the Fall). Any system of progress, such as the one symbolized by Shaw's Superman, that denies those principles is fundamentally unprogressive and inhumane. Exactly which of these two cures is the proper one will be left up to the individual to decide, though many have not decided. Secularists have left behind Shaw's remedy just as much as Christians have ignored Chesterton's cure.

We should decide, however, not only between Shaw and Chesterton but also *at all*. In a postmodern society where firm convictions are decried as arrogance, we are in desperate need of practical men and women, which in Chesterton's sense is to say that we need men and women of principle. All the tolerance and peaceful protest you can find is no match for a single person of action who truly believes (and can demonstrate how) that they are right and others are wrong. We have plenty of dragons today, perhaps even more so than our forefathers; but we have very few knights.

Both Chesterton and Shaw appreciated the fighting spirit, even amongst their foes. That is what truly served as the foundation of their friendship. Though they vehemently disagreed, the mere fact that they were each willing to engage the other in a firm manner kept them close and cordial right up to the day that Chesterton died. They were the best of enemies because they understood that a good fight from a skilled opponent could lead you to respect that opponent. We have no respect for opponents today; even the very word seems dirty. Today's *status quo* seems to be that if we can't agree then we should avoid each other. If you can't say something nice, then don't say anything at all. So we don't say anything at all, or anything of worth, and so we sit, sit, sit

as the great world spins forever in the same groove, going nowhere and accomplishing nothing. We are not living in a time of big theories, and as such we have no results.

Perhaps if we learned to fight again, then we could get somewhere: not a futile brawl of egos, but a true engagement of ideas and ideals. Perhaps the one thing that everyone should learn from Chesterton and Shaw is how to state their views firmly and clearly and without hesitation or fear and to love our enemies as ourselves, to see their flaws as reasons to love them more. Once upon a time, we felt a great sense of romance about the fighting spirit. Perhaps we should find that romance again. Perhaps what we need is to learn once again the sentiment and truth that Chesterton (who is an expert at summing things up) expressed in his poem “The Last Hero”:

The wind blew out from Bergen from the dawning of the day,
They ride and run with fifty spears to break and bar my way.
I shall not die alone, alone, but kin to all the powers,
As merry as the ancient sun and fighting like the flowers.
How white their steel, how bright their eyes! I love each laughing knave,
Cry high and bid them welcome to the banquet of the brave.
Yea, I will bless them as they bend and love them where they lie,
When on their skulls the sword I swing falls shattering from the sky.
The hour when death is like a light and blood is like a rose,—
You have never loved your friends, my friends, as I shall love my foes.
(*Collected Poetry, Part 1* 547-8)

Both Chesterton and Shaw realized that romance of battle their entire lives. Their careers (and friendship) were staked upon it, and they never backed down from their positions. Shaw died a vitalist, and Chesterton died a Catholic Christian. They never did agree, but they remained friends. Exactly what magical quality of character or mind allowed them to do so seems lost today, and maybe it is because we have misunderstood or forgotten what those two men really believed and fought for their whole lives.

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